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Remembering scenes of violence

Stylization and abstraction of violence on stage

Hoe herinneren we ons gewelddadige scènes? Stilering en abstractie van geweld op het podium

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Remembering scenes of violence: stylization and abstraction of violence on stage

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This essay will address the aesthetic and ethical tensions of representing violence on stage from both artistic and scholarly perspectives. Since 2006, beside my work as an academic, I have collaborated as a dramaturge and co-director with choreographer Malia Johnston. Together we have created three dancetheatre works, *Dark Tourists* (2007-8), *body / fight / time* (2011), and *Amanimal* (2013). *Dark Tourists* was inspired by the term "dark tourism", coined by tourism scholars Malcolm Foley and John Lennon to describe the tourist practice of visiting sites of atrocity and disaster (Lennon & Foley 2000). At an aesthetic level, Malia and I were interested in how memorial sites employ affective strategies in order to enable tourists to "feel" the force of the past. *Dark Tourists* featured two layers: one that showed individuals struggling in the aftermath of an un-named disaster, and another that showed dark tourists who followed in its wake.

body / fight / time employed the motif of the body and its shadow to explore violence at a more abstract level. The ensemble performance used physical conflict as the basis for the work's choreography, which featured movement patterns abstracted from gestures of fighting: kicking, striking, jumping, evading and so on. The work's scenes collapsed the distinction between inner and outer violence and explored the interconnectedness of violence *ethoi* between individuals and groups.

Amanimal featured two men fighting for survival in a precarious environment. The absurd action was structured by repetitive ritualistic "killings" of one performer by another. Alternating between choreography, theatrical action and song, the intimate work used intense physicality to examine relationships of extremity.

_ *body / fight / time*, Wellington, 2001

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Video still © Malia Johnston

_ *Amanimal*, Auckland, 2013.

I have chosen these performances for discussion not because they are exemplary works of art (such judgments are best left to others and reviews of each work are easily accessible) but because they allow me to articulate a set of responses to the theoretical concerns contained in this issue that are grounded in artistic practice. What has motivated these works, collaborative in nature, is not the pursuit of philosophical arguments so much as a broader interest in the nature of human relationships, from which ethical and political implications follow. I hope that by bringing these two different frames of enquiry together – scholarly and artistic – each may helpfully inform the other.

Dark Tourists, *body/fight/time* and *Amanimal* are selected in particular for their stylized approach to representing violence on stage. Their aesthetic strategies are distinct from either "in yer face" theatre that aims to shock audiences with violent content (a term that arose in the 1990s in response to a wave of confrontational British playwriting that incorporated graphic violence), or performance art that seeks to incorporate the real. Nor do these works depict historical violence but instead deal with the role of violence in everyday social life at a more abstract level. I wish to consider the meanings and affects generated by such theatrical abstraction of representations of violence, and to consider what theatre and dance in particular are able to uniquely offer to the task of representing violence. To do so I will reflect on a series of scenes from each of the pieces to consider how theatre, exploiting the stage as a virtual space, is able to simultaneously stage multiple temporalities. Upon this stage representations of violence can be imagined, enacted and remembered at the same time. Unbounded by the conventions of linear dramaturgy, experimental

performance is particularly adept at such temporal dramatic manipulation. In what follows, and drawing upon my own work, I wish to provide a series of examples that illustrate the manner in which live performance is able to set violence *beside itself* through complex compositions of time and action.

SHADOWS AND FORM

Theatre has long been associated with shadows, most notably by Plato in his parable of the cave. Plato's critique relies upon a firm division of appearance and reality, and presumes the inability of ordinary people to distinguish between the two: shadows deceive us and, in so doing, diminish us. The binary distinction between appearance and reality is much more complicated in practice however – fictive representation is always haunted by the real, whilst the real can never escape the shadow of the aesthetic context. Depictions of historical violence on stage, for example, are always haunted by the absences they denote – that of the real protagonists of historical violence. Similarly, performances that incorporate real violence – such as Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), in which the performance artist was shot in the arm – complicate what we understand as the real by dissolving the boundary between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic act. The performances that I discuss in this essay neither enacted real violence nor attempted a violent verisimilitude. Instead their artistic strategies were grounded in abstractions of violence. I wish to frame these abstractions as shadows to real-world violence and to consider the force that such shadows possess in and of themselves.

To begin with it is worth making note of the working methods by which these performances were constructed. Each work was devised in collaboration between the performers and the artistic project leaders (choreographer Malia Johnston, co-director/dramaturge Emma Willis, musician Eden Mulholland and videographer Rowan Pierce). Raw material was derived from processes of improvisation in which performers were given provocations based on the images or themes of the work and asked to generate personal movement-based, musical or textual responses. Such tasks could take a variety of forms. For example, in *Dark Tourists* performers were asked to improvise with old shoes and coats, exploring what meaning they could make from the objects through choreo-

_ *Dark Tourists*, Wellington, 2008

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graphic gestures. In *body / fight / time* performers had to construct a fight sequence with a partner, and then extract their own movements and transform these into a solo. In *Amanimal*, performers were asked to write monologue material on the subject of survival. The artistic approach to addressing each of the given themes was oblique, honoring the methodology of artists such as German choreographer Pina Bausch, who talks about maintaining distance between the original idea or impulse, and its analysis or explanation: "I always have this feeling that I must protect it. I must talk around it so that it remains untouched, at least to being with. Basically I want the group to use their imagination." (Servos & Weigelt 1984, 230) Such an approach preserves the space of the inarticulate – the not yet-formed thought or movement. At best, such improvisational methodologies carry over into the work from creation and rehearsal a fusion of the realms of dreaming and doing, of shadows and form.

This care to protect the "unspoken", which informed our methods of creation, was also central to the thematic concerns of the works related to violence. The significance of the interrelation of theatrical method, form and subject matter has been widely explored in scholarship concerned with theatrical depictions of violence that is deemed "unknowable". Claude Schumacher, for example, in writing of theatrical representations of the Holocaust suggests that such plays should offer no comfort and advance no solution but instead "[leave] the spectator perplexed, wanting to know more although convinced that no knowledge can ever cure him of his perplexity" (Schumacher 1998, 8). The working methods briefly descried above left open interpretive space for both performers and audience members. Violence haunted the performers but was seldom directly shown. Instead the works explored the gap *between* the effects of violence and its representation.

When representations of violence are deconstructed in such a way, the effect is that violence is set beside itself – it is doubled, or shadowed. In *body / fight / time* the externalization of inner conflict and intra-group conflict had the effect of producing a landscape haunted by shadows. These shadows had a meta-theatrical quality to them in the sense that Alice Rayner describes theatre as an especially haunted medium where shadows are integral to its meaning-making processes. Her study of the significance of ghosts to the very constitution of the theatrical event provides a complex and layered account of the duality and doubleness that marks performance – its "is" and "is not" status, which she usefully describes as "a kind of stereoptic double vision that sees thing an no-thing at once" (Rayner 2006, xxiv). At issue, she writes, "is the refusal in the deep sense of theatre to consent to the idea that invisible, immaterial, or abstract forces are illusions, that the spirits of the dead are imaginary, or that the division between matter and spirit is absolute" (xi). "The double in this sense", she states, "is not a reflection or imitation of an original but an appearance of a dynamic contradiction or opposition that cannot come to rest in either what is visible or what is invisible." (xii) Rayner's work goes to the heart of the complexity of theatrical representation and provides a useful phenomenological framework for considering how abstracted or oblique depictions of violence on stage gather affective force.

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_ *body / fight / time*, Wellington, 2011. The dancers confront their shadows.

In *body / fight / time* we were very interested in playing with the relationship between performers and their shadows as a way of making externally visible the "dynamic contradiction" that Rayner describes. Each of the performers had a shadow double. These doubles were projected figures created by filming each of the performers, then altering the image so that it appeared as a solid silhouette. The shadows first appeared in a group movement sequence at the beginning of the work. To begin with they behaved exactly as shadows should. Gradually, however, each of the shadows stopped mirroring their real other. Upon realizing that their shadows were standing watching them, the dancers one-by-one stopped moving. The shadows then began to move threateningly towards the dancers and a large brawl broke out, with each dancer fighting their shadow. This division of body and shadow set the scene for a range of visual and movement oriented strategies throughout the work that extended the motif.

In a comic sense the shadows were like clowns who undermined the seriousness of the performers and the "reality" of their stage actions. In another sense they behaved as unruly expressions of the subconscious. Yet again the shadows were an expression of the stage as a fundamentally ghosted space in the sense that Rayner writes of the refusal of theatre, "to consent to the idea that invisible, immaterial, or abstract forces are illusions, that the spirits of the dead are imaginary". The shadows' rebellion at the beginning of the work was an assertion of their autonomy. They later became witnesses – still observant figures that were a mirror not of the performers but the *audience*. This figurative relocation of the audience from the auditorium to the stage was reinforced in a scene in which a performer danced a solo with a camera attached to his head. The camera captured the perspective of the dancer and was projected on a screen behind. At the conclusion of the solo the performer looked out to the audience only to reveal on the screen behind an auditorium empty of bodies. The shadow bodies who later silently watched the dancers became the proxy audience for the absent spectators earlier suggested.

The appearance of the shadows within a thematic landscape of violence signaled the power of memory, capable of both upsetting the everyday and fundamentally framing how it is perceived. The shadows expressed the persistence of the traces that we leave behind us, visually depicting the otherness of the self *to* the self, presenting this relationship in both violent and restorative terms. Representation itself is a process that cannot be separated from violence: it is always haunted by shadows and absences, and audiences to such representations are always implicated within the process. Here we are returned to the scene of the cave, the site where shadows are taken for form. What Rayner's analysis offers is an understanding of the inter-re-

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_ *body / fight / time*, Wellington, 2011. Shadows watch as dancers perform.

latedness of the two. *body / fight / time* deliberately unsteadied representation in a self-referential way, yet maintained the emotional integrity of the performer's experiences within the work. Violence was both comic and heightened – playfully staged – and at the time utterly felt as real by the performers. Audience members were both invited to be spectators to the performance and at the same time figuratively put on stage *as* shadows, a gesture which was ethical in its orientation.

THE FORCE OF MEMORY

The word "remembering" given in the title of this essay denotes both my own act of recalling impressions of former artistic works, and the fact within each work the violence depicted is largely violence that is remembered – violence that is recalled and experienced affectively in the present. This was most explicitly the case in *Dark Tourists,* which was motivated by an interest in the body as a medium for the transmission of cultural memory. It examined the limits of feeling and emotion as pathways to understanding, asking how one preserves respect for the uniqueness of the experiences of others whilst still striving to articulate solidarity based on some degree of apprehension of the quality of suffering. In the previous section I discussed the manner in which abstracted dance and theatrical performance is able to evoke the inner landscape of characters. Here I am interested in the ways in which performance is able to effectively illustrate the ethical problems that arise from seeking to feel the force of the past.

Dark Tourists was a blend of dance and theatre where narrated text, dialogue, monologue and song were interwoven with choreographic sequences. The post-cat-

_ *Dark Tourists*, Wellington, 2008.

astrophic stage – a debris-strewn set featuring jackets, shoes and hair and radio tape recorders – was marked by a series of material and psychological traces. The hanging jackets created a landscape of empty forms, shoes were carefully carried about in piles, and images of the performers' hair were used to suggest their disappearance. These objects were responded to *as if* bodies, which produced a melancholy affect marked by a series of dis-placements: body from body, voice from body, body from space, and body from history. These displacements were structured by repetition. For example, various scenes in the work depicted the manner in which traumatic memory was viscerally "re-experienced". In one scene a character's act of remembering was depicted through a sequence in which she was "struck" by hammers. In the first part of the scene two male performers struck blows upon her while she contoured her body to avoid the objects' glances. In the second part of the scene, although the men had departed, her body continued in its movements, feeling the force the blows despite her solitude. She later re-performed the solo, this time holding the talismanic hammers.

In an imitative manner, the tourists of the work also used physical extremity as a means by which to feel something of the force of past violence. One of the final images of the work featured a performer, dressed in an old coat, draped precariously over the back of a ladder, as if imitating the position of a body washed up by a storm. The act was a culmination of the character's journey throughout the work where she performed choreographies that were imagined repetitions of the movements of the past wearers of the shoes and coats that she had collected. I have written elsewhere of the image of the washed up body as a "disturbing gesture [that] was

both a memorial act and an attempt to understand the other's experience through embodying it" (Willis 2014, 6-7).

Bryoni Trezise, in her analysis of concentration camp memorials, calls the economy of feeling that structures the transmission of historical narratives at sites such as concentration camp memorials the "memory affect". For Trezise, the implications of this affect are troubling. She suggests that by allowing spectators to both feel for and feel like Holocaust victims, memorials allow us to "purchase" a sense of ourselves as ethically and morally engaged citizens. What Trezise and others who have taken up this topic are concerned with, is how the focus on the feeling/affective experience of spectators comes at the expense of an "'ethical" relation to the other' (Trezise 2014, 17). The employment of what Trezise describes as the memory affect may have the *effect* of obscuring historical subjects in favouring of enhancing the subjective certainty of the spectator. When I visited Sachsenhausen Museum and Memorial in 2007, for example, an audio display that featured the oral histories of former prisoners of the camp was being dismantled, according to our tour guide (who worked for a tourism company, not the Museum), in favour of restoring the barracks that housed the exhibition to its "original" condition: feeling and identification was favoured over distanced engagement. The ambivalence of immersing spectators into a world of feeling and imagined affective connection was central to *Dark Tourists*. Old coats and shoes were taken on and off by the performers in attempts to wear the garments or walk in the shoes of another's experience. Such efforts expressed the attempt of the wearer to connect to and in some way grasp the experience of the other. Yet this grasping gesture was always thwarted: the fundamental distance between self and other could never be overcome. The washed up body, for example, was an image of violence where the desire to know the other through becoming the other resulted only in abjection.

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_ *Dark Tourists*, Wellington, 2008.

Whilst such an image illustrated the negative effect of the collapse of distinctions between then and now, self and other, theatre itself benefits from its ability to do just this. That is, theatre and dance are particularly well suited to *showing* in highly expressive terms the kinds of inter-subjective and inter-temporal tensions that define representations of historical violence. Elsewhere I have written of what American playwright Erik Ehn, in relation to *Soulographie,* his collection of plays concerned with genocide, calls subjective drift: "where 'I' and 'You' are nicely confused" (Ehn 2012, 8). Whereas the work of Emmanuel Levinas, which has been central to much recent writing on theatre and ethics, relies upon the distinction of self and other, and a recognition that one's own subjectivity is only constructed in

response to the ethical demands of the unknowable other, Ehn's work is interested in the slippages and overlaps *between* self and other. These have both positive and negative ethical effects. In one sense many of Ehn's characters illustrate what Caroline Wake describes as the desire *to have seen*: "In our absence, we wish that we were present and sometimes we wish with such force and such imagination that for a moment we might really believe that we were witnesses." (Wake 2013, 51) This solipsistic desire is deeply troubling. On the other hand, slippage between you and I also denotes shared responsibility. When I viewed the weeklong season of the seventeen plays in the *Soulographie* cycle, which featured extensive talkbacks as well as performances, what I experienced was the inauguration of a community committed to defying violence through the recognition that "this violence is in the world, but it is also in me" (Willis 2014b, 403). I take this slight divergence from *Dark Tourists* to illustrate the point that what is ethically precarious in extra-theatrical situations – such as visiting former concentration camp sites – can be exploited by theatre precisely in order to reveal the mechanisms of affective economies, something that Trezise describes as meta-affectivity. What is required to interrupt economies of feeling, she argues, are the kind of meta-affective circuit breakers that enable individuals to overcome "one's own affective complicity in the stagings of unspeakability" (Trezise 2014, 55). *Dark Tourists* suggested the ethical dead end reached when the memory affect alone structures one's encounters with the past: the violence inflicted upon oneself as spectator only ensures the perpetuation and persistence of violence in the present. Through use of imagery, music and movement, and though making feeling itself a subject, *Dark Tourists* sought to make evident the subtle violence that undergirds the gestures through which we seek to "know" the suffering of others.

TEMPORALITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

So far in this essay I have discussed the nature of theatrical shadows as substantive representational phenomena, and the manner in which theatrical performance is able to lay bare the affective mechanisms by which we seek to apprehend violent histories. I lastly wish to remark in more detail about the capacity of theatre to set violent representation beside itself through the manipulation of linear temporality. As I have already suggested, experimental performance is particularly adept at collapsing the distinctions between past, present and future, here and there, in order to create what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls an "aesthetics of responsibility" (Lehmann 2006, 184). Such an aesthetic extends itself to spectators, asking them to consider their own duties of care by heightening awareness of the act of spectatorship. In *Amanimal* we explored these obligations through a single relationship, which was governed by an ongoing interplay of heightened games and rituals.

Where *Dark Tourists* took as its subject an identifiable contemporary phenomenon and included familiar imagery, albeit abstracted, *Amanimal* occupied a much more fantastical landscape. The work began with two men performing a parade of

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strange creatures fashioned out of old fur coats – a pageant of other-worldly animals variously resembling sea creatures, rabbits and elephants. Out of this landscape of forms came a "ball of human," a rolling conglomeration of limbs from which two distinct humans emerged, one standing upon the other – a man and his conquered mountain. This struggle for domination was replayed variously throughout the work, with one character always outsmarting and overcoming the other. As with *body / fight / time*, there was a cartoonish quality to the violence depicted. One man would kill the other only for the corpse to rise again, setting the stage for the violent cycle to repeat itself. While the heightened world gave the impression of men, like children, playing at violence, cartoonish physical conflict was intercut with scenes in which the men revealed themselves *as* men – vulnerable and alienated. During monologues and songs the men reflected on the nature of survival and shared personal memories while audiovisual components of the performance denoted the sensitivity of memory and remembering. At the end of the work the stronger of the two men stood once again on the small mountain formed by the other's body, folding and refolding into ever-smaller squares a sheet upon which a projection of the weaker man gradually diminished until nothing was left: survival came at the cost of companionship.

Video still © Malia Johnston

_ *Amanimal*, Auckland, 2013

I wish to remark upon one scene in particular which illustrates the manner in which distinctive time-space realities were overlaid with one another in order to deconstruct an act of violence. In the first half of the work the men played out a scene where one stripped the other of his "skin", a thick fur coat, and proceeded to dismember him before eventually transforming the visceral remains into a rucksack. Whilst doing this, he recited a monologue to his prey. The text began:

We've gotten really close.
But,
It's not... it's not something to think about
Because
I realize something:
I don't want to be negative
... but...
I would kill you if I had to.
I'd be very sad about it/
    COME ON OUTCHA GET
    OUTCHA GET
    GET OUT
/I'd kill you, but I'd cry.
I'd certainly cry about it.

The capitalized text indicates the intrusion of the present action into the speculative future first proposed. That is, two temporalities are overlaid: the first man muses on the limits of friendship in dire circumstances, whilst at the same time enacting the worst-case-scenario described. The collapse of temporal distinctions unsettled the claim either past, present or future had on the reality of what was depicted on stage: Was the "prey" actually being killed? Was this a mimesis of an imagined future? Or was it perhaps a re-enactment of some action carried out long ago? Perhaps the man was reciting text composed in the *past* as a way of softening the violent action he carried out in the present. The violence performed was displaced from a clear causal chain of action, and its affects and effects spilled across the delimiters of time and place.

Such spill was the tactical strategy of the work's overall dramaturgy, which was structured by repetition. Throughout the performance the first man continued to find ways to kill the second, who in turn resisted the finality of any death, returning to life again and again. The circularity of the action suggested the ceaselessness of both violent impulse and regenerative capacity. The repetition of acts of killing was, as already noted, absurd and performed to comic effect. Such violence was both endemic in the fictive stage world, and at the same time had its efficacy constantly undermined. By breaking the normative causality where one thing leads to another, violence was troubling not so much for its visceral affective impact as it is for its seeming ubiquity and its refusal to confine itself within the boundaries of straightforward comprehensibility.

The text of the scene above ended as follows:

But in the process of killing you,
Which would be really sad,
I'd look at you and realize that after a while
The actual loneliness would give way
Because
That's the nature of survival I suppose.
    DAMN IT
    NO
But because I love you
I would turn you into something that would help me get out of here
Like a backpack.
    YEAH
There would be something beautiful about that.
And even after I'd made a backpack out of you
I'd still cry.
You'd keep me warm.
You'd carry things that I couldn't.
And I'd do all of this because I love you.

From here, the dancer wrapped the skin denoted by the fur coat around his back like a rucksack and danced a short solo. The delicacy of the moment was in sharp contrast with the viciousness of the killing, and the original act of violence was now transposed into a gesture of loving remembrance.

When constructing this scene and others, the images and action came first and ethical reflection, or reflection on the meaning of the performance, came later. These responses were, in the first instance, made without responsibility, which is to say that the improvised material was formative and that the performers were completely free in the choices they were able to make. This method of working from the inside out and then dealing with the very human problems exposed by the performers governed all three of the projects described in this essay. The terms response and responsibility are key here. In all of our work irresponsibility – a setting of the ethical and political to one side – was the artistic attitude from which creation began. Although this approach may seem to run counter to the obligations incurred when violence is set on stage, the effect is that violence is cut loose from the coherencies that normally frame it. Violence is translated into a series of aesthetic gestures that are complicated by the intrusions of love and physical intimacy, memory and the desire to transform the past through taking hold of its effects upon us in the present. Thus violence finds new ways to surprise and challenge spectators with merely repeating itself.

And what of the audience? While I cannot speak for the audiences of our works, nor assume their perspective, I would like to finally offer some brief remarks on the tacit relationship between spectators and the actions depicted in each of these works. To varying degrees, each of the works deconstructed the normative identificatory relationship between character and spectator. In *body / fight / time* representation was playfully problematized with dancers divided from their shadows. The alienation of shadows from the body was a means of unsettling the coherence that normally frames the representation of physical and psychological pain. *Dark Tourists* was positioned within a semi meta-theatrical frame: the subjects of the work *were* spectators, and the audience was invited to observe their own attempts to make sense of the 'dramas' they encountered. The ambivalence of the tourists' actions and the impossibility of getting inside the experience of their imitations held audience members at a distance. The pathos of the work came not from feeling what the characters felt, as Bertolt Brecht says of dramatic theatre (Brecht 1964, 71), but from the painfulness of identity failure. *Amanimal* asked its audience members to follow the impressionist sequence of play that the performers were engaged in but also addressed them directly, both through song and text, most explicitly in a section that took place at the mid-point of the performance, where selected spectators were invited onstage to help one of the performers construct a "garden". This garden was constructed out of coloured sheets which audience members were asked to twist into the shape of roses. These flower-forms were then projected in a sequence that showed them growing in the garden. The incorporation of the audience made them partners in the play of the characters and allowed them to leave their own traces in the fictive world.

Each of the performances significantly aesthetically mediated representations of violence. The abstraction of physical and psychological violence and its effects was a result of the processes by which each work was made. The intention was not a softening of the depiction of violence to make it more palatable, but a recognition of the complexities of giving inner experience outer form. As suggested at the beginning of this essay, theatre and dance are uniquely able to present multi-layered representations of violence and its effects through breaking with the classical dramatic unities of time, place and action. In so doing such performances ask spectators to engage with the complexity of violence as a socially networked phenomena and to consider their own location within such a network.

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